

Civil War Book Review

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Iron From the Deep: The Discovery and Recovery of the USS Monitor

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Review

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Sheridan, Robert E. *Iron From the Deep: The Discovery and Recovery of the USS Monitor*. Naval Institute Press, \$32.95 ISBN 155750413X

Poseidon's treasure

Reclaiming American naval history

The story of the most famous Union vessel of the Civil War is the subject of Robert E. Sheridan's **Iron From the Deep: The Discovery and Recovery of the USS Monitor**. The volume is one in a long line of fine naval literature published by the Naval Institute Press. **Iron From the Deep** is not a straightforward historical account, although it certainly fills that bill. Robert Sheridan, who was a member of the expedition that rediscovered the wreck off Cape Hatteras, has crafted a multi-disciplinary account of the vessel's saga. The author is a marine geophysicist and his attention to detail and intimate knowledge of the subject is evident throughout the work. Combining historical investigation and analysis, modern maritime archology, naval engineering, and modern recovery methods, Sheridan has written a remarkable volume.

The book can be divided into three major sections. The first portion, consisting of chapters 1 through 3, provides the background in design conception, building, battle action, and the sinking of the vessel in an Atlantic storm. The vessel was the brainchild of John Ericsson, one of the greatest naval architects of the 19th century. Sheridan paints a wonderfully detailed account of the *Monitor* from initial plans through acceptance by the navy. He also vividly describes the battle between the *Monitor* and the *C.S.S. Virginia* in Hampton Roads, appropriately relating the event to the ultimate demise of wooden warships. The author also relates in a fine historical narrative the sinking of the *Monitor*.

The second section comprises chapters 4 through 7. This concerns the discovery of the wreck site and positive identification of the vessel. The author

illustrates the techniques used with images of side scan sonar and underwater camera views. Perhaps the most important kernel of knowledge in this portion of the book is the combination of historical analysis, modern maritime archaeological practices, and the use of technology to conclusively prove a shipwreck's identity.

The third section consists of chapters 8 through 15. This is the most analytical portion of the work and focuses on several key issues surrounding the wreck. Primarily, can it be stabilized, raised and conserved. Although historians and naval history buffs would want the entire vessel and its contents in a museum, looking as close as possible as it did in 1862, this may not be possible. The turret, guns, engine, and some of the armor belt are being conserved, but some of the hull may be too corrupted, at least in the present state of technology, to be saved. The artifacts will be displayed, perhaps after decades of conservation, at the Monitor Center at Newport News Mariners' Museum.

Historians, maritime archaeologists, naval engineering buffs, and anyone who loves a well-written story about the life and fate of a famous vessel will thoroughly enjoy this book. It is informative, well-structured, thoroughly researched, and fills a void in the literature of the *Monitor*. This reviewer has only two small issues with the book, and both come from his background as a historian of the Civil War. The first is the use of the name *Merrimac* instead of the *Virginia* for the Confederate ironclad opponent. The author does state his reason for the usage from the preponderance of literature using that term. He also states that it is technically incorrect. From the historian's standpoint, he is incorrect in both circumstances. Once the Confederates rebuilt the *Merrimac* from the waterline up, redesigned the vessel into the well-known shape that made her the first Rebel ironclad, she ceased being the former *Merrimac* and became the *C.S.S. Virginia*.

The second issue is one of a matter of preference by the reviewer. Historians still cling to the Chicago Manual of Style for citations, using footnotes or endnotes. It is easier for the reader to scan the bottom of the page or at the end of the chapter to find the source of a quote or paraphrase. Also, further research is easier when the author, title, and publisher are found in a foot or end note. Although most disciplines have moved away from this method, it remains a standard for works of historical content. Readers familiar with works of archaeology, geology, engineering, etc. will not find this to be a problem whatsoever.

Gary D. Joiner is director of the Red River Regional Studies Center at Louisiana State University in Shreveport. He is also an Assistant Professor of History at LSU-S. His publications include One Damn Blunder From Beginning to End: The Red River Campaign of 1864 (Scholarly Resources: 2003). He is the co-author of numerous books, articles and technical reports in the areas naval history, archeology, regional history and cultural resources.